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SUBJECT: COLOMBIA SCENESETTER FOR CODEL LEMIEUX (FEBRUARY 17-19)

SUMMARY

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¶1. (SBU) Your upcoming visit to Bogota and two Colombian military facilities is an opportunity to discuss with the Colombians our shared fight against illegal drugs and illegal armed groups as well as the underlying social inequality that drives both phenomena. The possible referendum to allow President Uribe to seek a third term remains the central chord of Colombian politics and will define the tone of congressional elections in March and the presidential elections in May. Bilateral relations with Colombia remain solid but will be tested by our handling of the U.S.-Colombia Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and the regional sensitivities to our Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA). Despite improving performance on human rights throughout Plan Colombia, there are continuing abuses and potential for backsliding. The Colombian Armed Forces are back on track in their fight against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) with successful strikes on several key guerrilla commanders in 2010. The December 2009 kidnapping and assassination of a departmental governor demonstrated that the FARC can still carry out high profile attacks against the state. Prospects for peace in the near term are limited. Embassy Bogota has begun implementing the Colombia Strategic Development Initiative (CSDI) -- the logical evolution of Plan Colombia -- with greater focus on expanding state services in Colombia's ungoverned spaces where illegal armed groups and the illicit economy flourish. End Summary.

COLOMBIA IN TRANSITION

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¶2. (SBU) Embassy Bogota welcomes the visit of Senator George Lemieux and delegation to Colombia on February 17-19, 2010. In the past ten years, Colombia has transitioned from a near failed state and terrorist haven to a stable democracy. Murder and kidnapping rates have dropped dramatically, while the rule of law has been

strengthened through major judicial reforms. While Colombia still experiences serious problems with illegal armed groups, the conflict has ceased to be a threat to Colombia's national security and sovereignty.

¶3. (SBU) Colombia's turnaround can be attributed to improvements in overall security, but further progress depends on resolving chronic issues such as social inequality and land tenure. Colombia has made significant inroads in confronting narco-terrorism but drug trafficking organizations and illegal armed groups, often with ties to guerillas and organized crime, still operate in large parts of the country, including along borders.

¶4. (SBU) Colombia has been feeling the effects of the global economic crisis, though the impact has been lessened by conservative lending practices coupled with sound fiscal and monetary policies that have attracted foreign investment. Growth rates for 2009 were close to zero, but the GOC predicts 2.5% growth this year. Poverty rates have also decreased, though unemployment remains a major problem. About 60% of the economy is mired in the informal sector.

#### REELECTION AND ELECTIONS

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¶5. (SBU) The Colombian Congress passed a law in September permitting a referendum on whether President Alvaro Uribe may stand for a third term in the presidential elections on May 30, 2010. The Constitutional Court must now rule on the referendum process and its impact on the Constitution, a decision that may come in February or March. If the referendum does go forward, 25% of registered voters must participate with the majority of those voting in favor of reelection; current polls suggest Uribe would win in this scenario. President Uribe seldom speaks publicly of the referendum, characterizing it as a grassroots initiative of Colombian citizens. His popularity continues to hover around 70% after more than seven years in office. Should Uribe not run again, there are strong but far less popular candidates who could continue his policies, such as former Defense Minister Juan Manuel Santos or former mayor of Medellin Sergio Fajardo. Elections to replace the entire Congress (166 Representatives and 102 Senators) will be held on March 14, 2010.

#### BILATERAL AND REGIONAL RELATIONS

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¶6. (SBU) Colombia has been a staunch U.S. ally against the threats of narcotrafficking and terrorism. We continue to enjoy a robust extradition relationship, though the Supreme Court in 2009 denied requests to extradite the FARC operatives charged with taking hostage or attempting to harm U.S. citizens. Colombia is our fourth largest export market in the region and a growing destination for U.S. investment. However, Colombia is moving ahead with many free trade agreements with other countries, which have the potential of reducing U.S. agriculture exports to Colombia. Our close relations have made Colombia a target of criticism from some leaders in the region, especially after the signing of the DCA. The GOC has begun to patch up diplomatic relations with Ecuador, which Ecuador severed following Colombia's March 2008 military strike against FARC leader Raul Reyes in Ecuador. The Colombians have also recently engaged in "security diplomacy," providing training and assistance to neighbors (such as Mexico and Haiti) suffering from drugtrafficking and organized crime as well

as a possible deployment to Afghanistan.

#### CLOSE COORDINATION ON AID TO HAITI

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¶17. (U) Following the devastating earthquake in Haiti, Colombia closely coordinated with the United States the largest humanitarian aid effort in its history. Colombian assets in Haiti are under the Joint Task Force (JTF) HQ for Unified Response tactical control (TACON) and USSOUTHCOM approved the use of MILGRP support flights to transport Colombian assistance to Haiti, using what would have been the empty return leg of travel back to the United States with a capacity of up to 120,000 pounds of cargo. The Colombian military was averaging one to two flights to Haiti per day during the initial week of the crisis and is flying sustainment flights as needed, loaded with humanitarian relief and personnel. Over 400 Colombian personnel have deployed to Haiti in relief efforts. Colombia also sent a naval ship with humanitarian supplies (and is preparing a second), as well as a mobile military hospital and search and rescue teams.

#### VENEZUELA ON THE MIND

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¶18. (SBU) Colombian officials worry that Venezuela poses a growing military, economic, and covert threat. Venezuela has found it politically expedient to criticize the DCA during regional meetings, although Colombia has largely assuaged the concerns of other important regional players such as Brazil. The GOC has sounded alarms in response to Venezuela's arms purchases, all but open support for the FARC, border incursions, and bellicose rhetoric -- including Chavez' statements to "prepare for war" and refusal to meet with Uribe in Brazilian brokered talks. Caracas has blocked imports from Colombia, leading to border area confrontations and unrest. Bilateral trade, once thought to be of sufficient volume to prevent bilateral conflict, has fallen dramatically since August. Colombian exports declined by 33% in 2009 compared to 2008. We see no evidence that either side is actively preparing for hostilities. However, as tensions along the border rise and perceptions skew, there is a small risk that a local incident could spiral out of control. Real or not, the perception of the threat posed by Venezuela has changed Colombians' worldview, causing them to seek ever greater assurances of our friendship and support.

#### TRADE PROMOTION AND LABOR VIOLENCE

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¶19. (SBU) President Uribe publicly adheres to the commitment President Obama made in their June 29 meeting to move the FTA forward in the U.S. Congress once labor and human rights issues are adequately addressed. While Colombians generally understand U.S. political realities associated with a vote on the FTA, frustration has grown within the government, business and academic communities over the lack of action on the accord. GOC hopes were heightened, however, when President Obama highlighted Colombia in his State of the Union Address and February 11 BusinessWeek interview. Colombian business leaders fear that long-term inaction on the FTA will be detrimental to U.S.-Colombian relations. Both government and private sector leaders fear that U.S. delays in ratification will harm prospects for ratification of trade deals with Canada and the European Union. The majority of organized labor is opposed to free trade agreements and argues that the GOC needs to do more to respect worker rights and to protect unionists from violence. In 2009, 39 unionists were murdered, which is less than the 49 murders

in 2008 and represents a lower homicide rate for unionists than for the general population -- the homicide rate for unionists in 2009 was 5 per 100,000 compared to 34 per 100,000 for the general population.

## HUMAN RIGHTS

¶10. (SBU) By nearly all measures, the human rights situation in Colombia has improved dramatically over the last ten years. Serious human rights concerns remain, however, especially with regard to the Colombian Army. The 2008 exposure of military "false positives," in which unarmed civilians were murdered and presented

as combat deaths, led to the dismissal of 51 members of the Colombian Army. We are concerned about the military's lukewarm commitment to investigating these types of cases and its poor cooperation with the Prosecutor General's office. We are working with the Colombian military to improve its respect for human rights as it carries out security operations. Impunity for human rights violations and past crimes carried out by paramilitary and guerrilla groups is a serious problem. NGOs complain that the GOC regularly paints them as supporters of terrorist organizations, which in turn fuels growing death threats against them. Revelations that Colombian intelligence and law enforcement entities carried out illegal surveillance against human rights groups, unionists and political opponents have also undermined the GOC's credibility on human rights. Colombia has more than three million internally displaced persons (IDPs).

## AFRO-COLOMBIAN AND INDIGENOUS POPULATIONS

¶11. (SBU) Colombia's populations of Afro-descendants (between 11 and 20% of the population) and indigenous (between 1 and 3% of the population) suffer from discrimination, social exclusion, structural poverty, and lack of political participation. This marginalization allows illicit drug cultivation or trafficking to move into their communities, subjecting them to a disproportionate share of violence and displacement. The GOC created the Commission for the Advancement of Afro-Colombians to help improve education, income generation, and political representation within the Afro-Colombian population. However, the Colombian Congress has not passed legislation to implement the commission's recommendations. The Embassy has implemented special programs to help Afro-Colombian and indigenous populations realize greater participation in the political and economic life of the country, and Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg and Foreign Minister Jaime Bermudez signed a bilateral Action Plan on Racial and Ethnic Equality on January 12, ¶2010. Recognizing the need for increased participation and integration of Afro-Colombians and African descendants worldwide, Colombia presented to the UN an initiative proclaiming 2011 as International Year for People of African descent, which was approved with unanimous consent.

## CONFLICT STALLED, PEACE DELAYED

¶12. (SBU) The GOC made significant progress against the FARC in 2008: the deaths of 3 FARC Secretariat members, the liberation of 15 prized political hostages, including 3 Americans, and record high desertions. Progress in 2009 was mixed, however. The December 2009 kidnapping and assassination of the governor of

Caqueta Department marked the highest profile political kidnapping by the FARC since President Uribe assumed office in 2002. The Colombian Armed Forces has scored major successes in 2010 with strikes that have killed or seriously wounded several front commanders, hampering the FARC's offensive and logistical capabilities. Nonetheless, the FARC can still carry out asymmetrical attacks on selective soft targets. Any significant progress towards peace seems unlikely until after the elections; we expect the guerrilla groups to wait to see whether Uribe will be reelected before considering a broader peace process.

#### THE COLOMBIA STRATEGIC DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE

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¶13. (SBU) To consolidate the gains of Plan Colombia, we have developed the Colombia Strategic Development Initiative (CSDI), which meshes with Colombia's own National Consolidation Plan (PNC). Our efforts initially focus on four priority zones of ongoing conflict, drug trafficking and social marginalization. PNC/CSDI has prioritized addressing the lack of state presence that enables coca production and illegal armed groups, and seeks to establish state presence in strategic, under-governed parts of the country. The plan is centered on increasing territorial control in these areas to provide security for communities, to achieve permanent coca eradication, to transfer security responsibility to the police, to provide a wide range of socio-economic services to address the root causes of marginalization, and to improve the justice sector to strengthen the rule of law. A major challenge to implementation is achieving strong, effective civilian leadership of the PNC. The head of Social Action (Accion Social), Colombia's development agency, is the titular head of the PNC effort. Civilian agencies have been reluctant, however, to devote their budgets to the effort, often leaving the Ministry of Defense organizationally in front. Other obstacles include the need for a comprehensive GOC security strategy to transition from military to police in "consolidated" territories, more clarity on a post-eradication strategy, stronger presence of the justice sector in CSDI areas, and increased funding support for PNC ministries in the GOC budget.

#### MILGRP: AIMING FOR IRREVERSIBILITY

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¶14. (SBU) The Military Group (MILGRP) is one of three primary CSDI implementing agencies and the lead agency in the CSDI Central Band -- stretching from the former FARC stronghold in the Department of Meta to Buenaventura on the Pacific coast. MILGRP supports the Colombian military in achieving territorial control of conflict zones through training, equipment, fuel, and flight hours, in order to allow subsequent interventions in socio-economic development and democratic governance. MILGRP also assists throughout the consolidation process through support to Regional Coordination Centers, humanitarian assistance, counternarcotics, and de-mining.

¶15. (U) MILGRP has focused its support to the Colombian military using a three phased approach. The first focused on building Colombian military forces, projecting those forces into ungoverned spaces and securing those spaces. It also supported offensive operations against illegal armed groups on a scale never seen before. The second phase, currently being executed, focuses on securing, consolidating and sustaining those gains, increasing offensive operations against illegal armed groups, and ensuring the irreversibility of those gains. The third phase, to be initiated in 2011, is to promote a strategic partnership to sustain key Colombian military capabilities.

¶16. (SBU) The MILGRP currently supports eight program areas: joint rotary wing, ground operations, riverine operations, governability, airpower, maritime interdiction, joint intelligence and communications, and joint force initiatives. Support to these programs is vital in both the short- and long-terms. In the short-term, we will assist Colombia in controlling illegal armed groups and bringing peace and rule of law to the Colombian

population. In the long-term, we will focus on building a strategic partnership with Colombia and developing key Colombian military capabilities that can support U.S. national security objectives worldwide.

#### VISIT TO COLOMBIAN BASES

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¶17. (SBU) You will be the first U.S. Member of Congress to visit the Tolemeida Military Fort in Nilo municipality, Cundinamarca -- one of the seven named DCA bases. Tolemeida is also the headquarters for the Colombian Army's rotary wing aviation brigade. Developing the Colombian military's air mobility capabilities constitutes the single most important contribution of U.S. Southern Command under Plan Colombia -- as air mobility has been the key enabler for the Colombian military's significant gains over insurgent groups in conflict areas. Colombian Special Forces units under the Joint Command for Special Operations (CCOES) are trained at Tolemeida. Thirty-eight Colombian soldiers are currently being trained at this facility to join U.S. forces as part of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. You will also visit the Colombian air base in Melgar, Tolima, where we help support training programs with U.S. aviation simulators. Both of these bases will also serve as regional helicopter training centers, with the Government of Mexico serving as the test case for this regional training initiative.

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